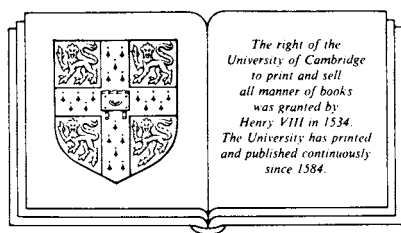


‘RELIGION’ AND THE RELIGIONS IN THE ENGLISH ENLIGHTENMENT



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To my parents,
Jean and Duncan

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INTRODUCTION



And such is the deplorable Condition of our Age, that a Man dares not openly and directly own what he thinks in Divine Matters, tho it be never so true and beneficial... and yet a Man may not only make new Discoveries and Improvements in Law or Physick, and in the other Arts and Sciences impunibly, but also for so doing be deservedly encourag'd and rewarded.

John Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, Preface

'That there exist in the world such entities as 'the religions' is an uncontroversial claim. There may be discussion about whether the beliefs and practices which are said to constitute the various religions are legitimate or 'true', but few would deny that these systems exist. So too, the term 'religion', as a generic description of what the plural 'religions' are about, is part of everyday discourse and is used with some precision by scholars. However, it was not always so. The concepts 'religion' and 'the religions', as we presently understand them, emerged quite late in Western thought, during the Enlightenment. Between them, these two notions provided a new framework for classifying particular aspects of human life. The task of this study is a twofold one: first, to examine the emergence of the twin concepts 'religion' and 'the religions'; and second, to give an account of the new science of religion which they made possible.

The first part of this project owes much to Wilfred Cantwell Smith's classic *The Meaning and End of Religion*. It is Smith's contention that during the age of reason the name 'religion' was given to external aspects of the religious life, to systems of practices. Whereas in the Middle Ages the concern of the Christian West had been with faith—a 'dynamic of the heart'—in the seventeenth-century attention shifted to the impersonal and objective 'religion'. Increasingly this term came to be an outsider's description of a dubious theological enterprise. Along with 'religion' came the plural 'religions'—'the Protestant Religion', 'the Catholic Religion', 'Mahometanism', 'heathen Religion', and so on. These too were abstracted, depersonalised systems which were intended to represent in propositional terms the sum

total of the religious lives of other peoples (a task which, incidentally, Smith believes the concepts were inadequate to perform).¹ In the present work I shall be examining in more detail this process of the objectification of religious faith, focussing particularly on the English contribution to the ideation of 'religion' and 'the religions'. In the course of this examination I shall be paying particular attention to the unique contributions of Protestant scholastics, Platonists, and those rationalists generally referred to as 'deists'.

The second theme of this book is rather more neglected. Most accounts of the history of comparative religion or of *Religionswissenschaft* have the 'dispassionate' study of the religions beginning in the nineteenth century with such figures as Max Müller and C. P. Tiele.² Yet for a number of reasons the science of religion had to begin earlier. In the first instance, it would be rather curious if in the seventeenth century – the age of developing natural science – attempts were not made to place the study of religion on a similar footing. This was the projected discipline which that champion of free thought John Toland urged upon his more conservative contemporaries. It was an undertaking made all the more urgent by a crisis of authority within Christendom which highlighted the need for an honest and unbiassed appraisal of the competing forms of Christianity and, for the most thorough-going thinkers, of the claims of other 'religions'. The great revolutions in science and religion which took place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries thus paved the way for the development of a secular study of the religions, and equally importantly, of a concept 'religion' which could link together and relate the apparently disparate religious beliefs and practices found in the empirical 'religions'.

Another reason we would expect the 'scientific' study of 'religion' to begin at this time is to do with the process of ideation itself. Paradoxical though it may sound, it is evident from the philosophy of science that objects of study are shaped to a large degree by the techniques which are used to investigate them. If we apply this principle to the history of 'religion', it can be said that the very methods of the embryonic science of religion determined to a large extent what 'religion' was to be. It would be expected that 'religion' and the strategies for its elucidation would develop in tandem. For this reason 'religion' was constructed along essentially rationalist lines, for it was created in the image of the prevailing rationalist methods of investigation: 'religion' was cut to fit the new and much-vaunted scientific method. In this manner, 'religion' entered the realm of the intelligible. It lay open to rational investigation while its specific forms – 'the religions' – could be measured against each other, or against some intellectualist criterion of truth. As we shall see, inquiry into the religion of a people became a matter of asking what was believed, and if it was true. The emergence of the idea of religion thus entailed tests of religious truth, theories of religion,

comparisons of 'religions', in short, a whole set of rules which governed the manner in which the nascent concept was to be deployed. Toland's wish had come true, though perhaps not in the way he would have liked.

If the time of the appearance of this new interpretative framework was the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, then the place was England. Of course, England was not the only country in the Western world where a secular approach to the religions was evolving. The *philosophes* of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment have some claim to be considered as co-pioneers of comparative religion.³ Yet it was in England, in the previous century, that the groundwork was laid down. Here the Enlightenment first dawned in an historically tangible way. The religious upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries meant that Englishmen enjoyed a freedom of religious expression which was matched nowhere in Europe, with the possible exception of the Netherlands. The early Enlightenment in England is attested by a body of literature, by controversies, and by certain figures in a way that is not true of France, or anywhere else.⁴ Most importantly, England, during the time-frame of this study, underwent considerable changes in religious orientation. As Locke put it, the kings and queens of post-Reformation England had been 'of such different minds in point of religion, and enjoined thereupon such different things', that no 'sincere and upright worshipper of God could, with a safe conscience, obey their several decrees'.⁵ Not only did this diachronic pluralism contribute greatly to secularisation, but it led also to the comparison of the various forms of Christianity with each other, and shaped to a significant extent the way in which the English were to view other 'religions'. The whole comparative approach to religion was directly related to confessional disputes within Christianity. As we shall discover, these confessional conflicts were the single most important factor in the development of comparative religion.

Another reason that England was the setting for the emergence of these new ideas of religion was that it was here that historical criticism of the Bible got under way in earnest. While within Christendom, religious pluralism had provided the impetus for the comparison of 'religions', from without, discoveries in the New World and the Pacific were calling into question biblical views of human history. This challenge to sacred history, reinforced by the writings of such thinkers as Spinoza, La Peyrère, and Hobbes, was to set the more radical of the rationalising theologians on the path of biblical criticism.⁶ 'Religions' thus came to be credited with a natural, rather than a sacred history.

It remains only to indicate something of the plan of this book. After a brief examination of the backgrounds of Enlightenment ideas of religion, we shall move, in the second chapter, to a consideration of the rise of the idea of religion in theological controversy. Two countervailing tendencies

will be examined: Calvinism, in which 'genuine religion' is construed as 'saving knowledge', and Platonism, in which 'religion' is deemed to be 'natural'. In the third chapter we shall see how in a creative combination these two tendencies, the so-called deists modified 'religion' to make it a natural object constituted primarily by propositional knowledge. These two chapters thus describe how religious ideas of religion were secularised. In the final two chapters, we see how the history of 'religion', once thought to be exhausted in biblical accounts of idolatry and apostasy, came to be credited with its own, non-sacred or natural history. Thus, just as the theology of 'religion' was secularised, so the sacred history of 'religion', became simply the history of 'the religions'.

We turn now to antecedents – the reformers, Renaissance Platonists, and classical atheists who were important precursors of, respectively, the seventeenth-century Calvinists, the English Platonists, and the 'deists'.